

"To promote understanding and appreciation of the religious and spiritual values which abide in the processes and relationships of agriculture and rural life; to define their significance and relate them to the Christian enterprise at home and abroad."

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WHETHER RURAL AMERICA*

By M. L. Wilson

Let us consider what a missionary from an entirely strange culture would think about rural America if he visited us today. Since he would not be a product and a part of our culture, he would see us objectively, and see things in our culture that we do not see, or if we do see them, they are so commonplace that they mean but little.

On the material side he would see a great scientific and technological development. He would see the great use of farm machinery that is so characteristic of much of American agriculture. He would see the application of science in all the phases of American agriculture, in methods of cropping and fertilizing, in selected and improved germ plasms, both plant and animal. He would see this great phenomenon in the physical form of rubber-tired tractors and combines and milking machines and two-row corn pickers and trucks and threshing apparatus and cream separators and automobiles and telephones and radios.

He would find that farmers have accepted science. This is a very notable and important fact. For a century and a half the mass of farmers generally had a whole-hearted contempt for what they called book farming. But book farming, along with the whole modern world of science and technology, has at long last been accepted in spirit by the mass of American farm people. Two generations have converted a whole agricultural people from farming based upon folklore and tradition to farming based upon science. This result is a tribute to the effectiveness of educational processes. There are between 15,000 and 20,000 teachers of scientific agriculture in the colleges of agriculture, the Extension Service, and the Smith-Hughes high schools.

Agriculture in America has been very much commercialized. The commercialization of agriculture is a phenomenon that is interrelated with almost every other notable trend in modern society. This has meant that farmers are increasingly dependent upon a cash income and upon the outside world.

About a quarter of a century ago farmers paid out nothing for power. That is, they paid out less for power than they took in. The farm world took in from its sale of horses and mules more money than it paid out for all forms of power. In recent years American farmers pay out annually about one billion dollars--\$1 out of \$8--for all forms of farm power. Thousands upon thousands of farmers cannot plow an inch of ground without first laying money on the line for gasoline or kerosene or fuel oil.

*From an address by M. L. Wilson, Under Secretary of Agriculture, before the annual meeting of the Christian Rural Fellowship, in New York, N. Y., December 2, 1938. (A limited number of mimeographed copies of the full address may be requested of Dr. Wilson at the United States Department of Agriculture.)

Farm indebtedness has doubled over this same period. In 1910 American farmers paid out annually about 200 million dollars in interest on their mortgage debt. In recent years, this interest payment has approximately doubled, and currently stands at about 400 million dollars. This is in the face of the fact that the interest rate is lower, and that net farm income is no greater than a quarter of a century ago.

In 1880 American farmers had an equity of 62 percent in their farm real estate values. By 1935 that equity was reduced to 39 percent. This is a decline of 23 percent in less than a lifetime.

Another important material aspect of American agriculture in this era is the national effort being made to adjust agriculture to the new economic order. Ever since the World War, much effort has been directed to problems growing out of the economic maladjustment of agriculture--efforts to foster operator ownership, to relieve agricultural indebtedness, and above all to attain some sort of parity of income between agriculture and industry.

I think it is beyond all question that these national efforts will be continued. Programs of national agricultural adjustment such as ever normal granary, Soil Conservation Service, and Farm Security Administration are here to stay. The country will not have it otherwise until the problems have been fully solved. Unbiased people are not very impressed when industrial leaders who close up factories as soon as a price decline seems ahead, accuse agriculture of aiming at scarcity because it seeks to produce no more than the maximum that the country can use and export.

Another material factor that our visiting missionary from a foreign culture would notice is that there is no longer an outlet for excess farm population. Rural areas have immemorially supplied urban and industrial areas and frontiers out of their excess population. Today, however, the frontiers are gone; and the cities and industrial centers, instead of wanting to recruit labor from the country, have unemployed labor that they cannot take care of. So much for the material side of our rural culture.

On the non-material side, our visitor seeing rural America for the first time would notice many things. Remember he could see objectively. He would notice first of all, perhaps, that country people are in many cases becoming imbued with urban characteristics. This would be partly material; that is, the luxuries and conveniences of the city have in a measure penetrated to the country. Communication and transportation have resulted in country people doing, seeing, and thinking many of the same things that city people do.

Yet our missionary from the foreign culture would sense, I believe, that in many cases rural people of today have changed from what they were in a way that cannot be measured tangibly and that cannot be stated statistically. I believe there has been a loss from rural life of something for which there is no name, something that I have always called x , because x in algebra always represented an unknown quantity which at the same time was the key to the problem.

Farm life has in many cases lost a charm that it once had. Rural churches and rural family life have lost something admirable and worthy, without gaining much in its place. It may be that it is the radio and auto and movies that have disrupted rural churches and taken much of the sweetness from rural family life. Whatever the cause, it is a fact that too often the church is not the center of

social life and friendship and of fun, that it used to be. If once we had only a kerosene lamp to read by, where there is electricity now, the things we read aloud in the family were of a lot higher quality than the wood pulp on the living room table today.

There was once a time when, if someone were sick, there were almost too many neighbors around wanting to help out with the chores and the haying, or the cooking and the nursing, or whatever was needed. I don't believe that many farm homes where sickness occurs today are bothered by having too many neighbors wanting to help.

The farmers' literary societies that used to meet in the kerosene-lighted, one-room country school, and the Chautauquas and debating societies that farmers used to turn out to, seem to have been replaced largely by the movies. I have nothing against movies, but, without indulging in any sentimental nostalgia, I think that it is definitely to be regretted that the old forms of social life, in which people participated, have been to such an extent replaced by amusements wherein people are mere spectators. This loss of x cannot be stated statistically, and sociologists, for all their acknowledged virtues and for all their fulsome questionnaires, can't tabulate it. But it is a very real and very serious phenomenon. There is a lot of basic individual and social psychology, a lot of folklore, a lot of philosophy, a lot of elemental religion and faith in it. It can be studied, but it has to be studied as a cultural pattern.

Another important psychic phenomenon of this age is the great growth of a feeling of economic insecurity. It is not restricted to the cities. Our farm people no longer have the feeling that they are secure against the onslaughts of unfriendly economic forces. They do not feel secure in the possession of their farms. They do not feel secure against the hazards of old age. They do not feel secure against the oppressions of debt. They are tied unwillingly to the fate of things that are wholly beyond their control. This condition results from a thousand causes, most important of which, perhaps, are the commercialization of agriculture, and the specialization of economic enterprise which characterizes this modern world.

This feeling of insecurity in rural life is a part of the general psychological confusion that reigns everywhere today and is very closely connected with the fact that our physical world has changed more rapidly than our ideological world. This change is just as great in agriculture as elsewhere. To put this another way, our non-material culture has not changed as rapidly as our material culture. They are not in balance. They do not form an integrated pattern. The old ideologies, the old non-material culture, the old assumptions and habits of thought and ideas do not prepare farm people for the world in which they are living today.

It has always been believed that rural culture is somehow different from urban culture. The ancients saw and wrote about this difference. Among the Greeks, Socrates and Aristotle pointed out the moral benefits of the life of the husbandman. Virgil, Horace, Cicero, Columella, and other great Romans celebrated the blessings and benefits peculiar to those who lived the rural life. Philosophers, men of religious insight and scientists have in all ages noted the moral attributes of a simple life close to nature. The great English anthropologist of today, Professor R. R. Marett of Exeter College, Oxford, believes that he has discovered a universal inclination of all men to be religious, to crave religious expression no matter what their culture may be, and also to till the soil, and to be happiest when working next to nature.

Some of the differences between rural and urban culture traits yield to ready definition and measurement, but some of them comprise the indefinable x that I referred to a moment ago. There is, I believe, good reason to deplore much of the urbanization of country people and to deplore the loss of x that I mentioned.

However, I am an optimist and in respect to rural culture I believe I have reason to be optimistic. I believe there are good reasons why we should believe that the best characteristics of rural culture will, in the future, be revived, be developed and be prolonged. We are on the threshold of a cultural advance that will parallel the advance that the physical sciences have made in the last century.

There are, first, philosophical reasons for this optimism. The scientific and technological progress in agriculture that has been so marked recently and that has been associated with the urbanization and commercialization of farming, will no doubt continue for a long time to come. Perhaps it will even be accentuated. But along with the extension of technology, there promises to be an extension of the best of the scientific method and spirit into the field of social and human relationship.

The world of agricultural science has recently shown unmistakable signs of developing a rural social conscience. As never before, scientists and technologists in agriculture are becoming aware of the social implications of scientific agricultural progress. They see that science by increasing man's power over nature, has increased his power not only to build but to destroy, not only to save life, but also to kill.

The British Association for the Advancement of Science devoted its annual meeting this year largely to the social problems that science has created, and the statements made at that time by some of the most famous men in the world of science indicate that science in the future will tend to weigh more carefully than ever before the social good or ill that may result from its findings. The materialistic era of science is passing.

Furthermore, the social sciences, both in general and as they relate to agriculture, are growing in such a way that we may reasonably expect from them the development of knowledge of new social controls. The social sciences, like the physical sciences, are beginning to acquire a social conscience.

It is my own belief that a new, integrated science of man is already in the process of development. This new science of man, based upon values to be found in philosophy and religion, integrates all the relevant knowledge of man and society that the different sciences provide. There is another reason to believe that out of the growth of this science there will come an applied science of social engineering that will help mankind in general and farm people in particular to direct their own destinies toward a happier, a more secure, and a fuller life.

In the realm of specific fact, there are excellent reasons for believing that our rural culture will in the near future--say the next fifty years--rediscover and restore the peculiar values of rural life, some of which may have in the recent past been lost. Let me now bring to your attention several items which have, I believe, a great future importance. I like to think of them as the acorns of a future forest of a rural culture--acorns that have already sprouted.

In the first place should be mentioned the schools of rural philosophy that have been sponsored by the United States Department of Agriculture and the State colleges of agriculture. These are schools for workers and leaders in agriculture, and thus far have been held at about thirty-five of the State colleges. Current social and economic problems are discussed in them, but these economic and social issues are discussed only upon the basis of a philosophical examination of the social and moral assumptions upon which programs of improvement or reform are based. There is an attempt to start at the very basis of our processes of thought to discover what social and moral values in farm life we wish to aid or preserve.

In the second place, in the regular colleges of agriculture, there are already beginnings of a movement to reshape education in such a fashion as to put new emphasis upon moral and cultural values as opposed to mere commercial and technical efficiency.

The venerable Dean Hills of the University of Vermont, a chemist who is the oldest active agricultural educator today, has installed in required course in agricultural philosophy for all students of agriculture. This course aims to provide agricultural students in Vermont with the materials wherewith to examine the fundamental questions of rural life. It is not rural sociology, but rural philosophy. The applications of psychology, ethics, religion and philosophy to the problem of how farmers should live is the purpose of the course. This course in agricultural philosophy is in my opinion as significant as the first course that was given in agricultural science over a century ago. And you all know what a great oak that acorn grew to be.

At the University of Florida, students in agriculture take work that gives them a background in the social sciences and in the humanities from which to view farm life and farm problems. A few years ago, this was an experiment. Now it is an established and growing fact. It is especially significant, I believe, that the required courses in the humanities and the social sciences are generalized and integrated rather than specialized and departmentalized. It is the aim to encourage social and philosophical understanding, so that the farmers of the future may judge of their role in the social world, their place in the great universe in accordance with a broad, generalized knowledge, and with a hungry and open spirit. No one is so foolhardy as to feel that in this respect Florida has suddenly found the Utopia of agricultural education. Yet there can be no doubt that a great deal has been accomplished, and that the first experimental stage is passed. President Tigert and his coworkers in the General College and Dean Hume of the College of Agriculture are beginning to get the acclaim they deserve as successful pioneers in the field of agricultural education and rural social progress.

Within the Department of Agriculture, the study of our farm population and rural life, which was started by Dr. H. C. Taylor, has steadily increased in recent years. Those in charge of these studies are to my personal knowledge very aware of and sympathetic to the moral values in farm life which we all wish to see preserved.

Beyond this, there is another project that is new. It is a pioneering project that aims to study historically the trends in those non-material aspects of farm culture that do not yield to the conventional methods of sociology.

A year ago when the Department of Agriculture and the Land-Grant Colleges

joined in an observance of their Seventy-Fifth Anniversary, emphasis was placed upon these non-material aspects of rural culture. The Department might have made a display of scientific, technical and material advance within agriculture. Instead of this, it sponsored an exhibit of rural arts, symbolizing a new concern for those spiritual and moral qualities which are as important as life and death, and which as a matter of fact can make the difference between happiness and misery. The public reception of this exhibit of the rural arts was one of great enthusiasm. Persons whose political and economic ideas were in almost violent opposition agreed like brothers in their admiration for the things and qualities represented in this exhibit.

The development of the county planning project and of farmer discussion groups throughout the country by the Department of Agriculture and the colleges of agriculture is an attempt to make rural social planning democratic regardless of changes in specific agricultural programs that may take place. The machinery of this sort for giving individual farmers and localities a voice in the long process of democratic policy making will in any case be continued. The inclination of farm people to democracy is strong and will always be preserved.

In this world of great economic interdependence, it is beyond question that social controls and rural social planning must be increasingly used. Social planning of one sort or another is an accomplished fact in every country of the world today. One of the most vital issues confronting the democracies today is the question of developing institutions whereby social planning can be made and kept democratic. The development of such institutions as farmers' discussion groups, county planning, and so on are significant steps that have already been taken to make democracy really work in the field of social control.

The Department of Agriculture and the Land Grant Colleges have made and are making a determined effort to train farm people in the technique of free group discussion. It is our faith that by fostering the growth of farmers' discussion groups in which everyone may voice his opinion, and in which every shade of opinion can be expressed and listened to with tolerance we are strengthening democracy both for the present and the future.

An outgrowth of this local discussion among farmers of local agricultural problems is county planning. The democratic crystallization of opinion in this way has led to efforts to coordinate the needs and desires of farmers in one locality with State, regional, and national interests. Thus upon the basis of free discussions, and of local agencies is coming a better understanding of local desires in national councils, and a better understanding of national problems in local councils. And the institutions for coordinating the local and the national for the practical purposes of democratic planning are already beginning to work.

The growth of farmers' cooperatives, particularly those of the type of the Farm Bureau in Ohio and Pennsylvania, is very encouraging. Here is one of the most important evolutionary mechanisms. Cooperation does not mean Utopia, but cooperation can be a singularly important device for working together in a new world of social and economic interdependence. Cooperatives incline to preserve rather than to destroy the rural virtues which we cherish. I believe it is also significant that the Ohio Farm Bureau cooperative has studied the work of Father Coady at Antigonish, Nova Scotia, has undertaken an extensive program of adult education, and is working hand in hand with urban groups that face the future with similar ideals.

There are many, many other developments of an importance as great as that of any of the things I have talked about already. They are too numerous to describe, but some of them should be listed to reveal the scope and spread of them. Those that come first to my mind are the Folk High School at the University of Wisconsin, the Cooperative Rural Health and Hospital Associations, the Rural Cooperative Credit Unions, the Adult Education movement in general, the excellent work of the national farm organizations--the Bureau, the Grange, the Farmers' Union, and so on--the Commodity Cooperative Marketing and Credit Association, the rural industrial communities, some sponsored by the government, some by private agencies, the very important and opportune work of the American Country Life Association, and so on.

These things that I have just detailed are some of the acorns that have already sprouted and will produce the forest of tomorrow. When we have such facts as these, we need not merely wonder and dream.

American agriculture might conceivably yield wholly to the forces of technical and commercial efficiency and evolve into corporation farming, or conceivably it might be collectivized, as in a communist or totalitarian state. I suppose it could be argued that technical efficiency would be served in either of these cases. However, there can be no question but what the non-material aspects of American rural culture are such that there is no chance that American agriculture will evolve into any of these patterns.

The psychology of American rural people is such, however, as to favor working together and working with the rest of society through such devices as cooperatives or by democratically determined government programs. The family-sized farm is aided as much as injured by the latest technological advances. Much of the farm machinery now made can be very efficiently used upon the family-sized farm.

It seems safe to assume, therefore, that for some time the technical advance of agriculture will be made upon the basis of family-sized farms. Institutional evolution will consist in governmental programs for nation-wide adjustment and cooperative organization to secure new economic benefits.

It is a point worth mentioning that the present Secretary of Agriculture is a man of profound religious sensitivities, who is keenly aware of the necessity for preserving the peculiar virtues of rural life, and is equally determined that democratic habits and procedures be strengthened rather than weakened.

I should like here to express my confidence in the rural section of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, and in the far-sighted and practical leadership of Ben Landis. It is exerting a positive Christian influence upon Federal and State institutions of agriculture--an influence that is all to the good. The Secretary of Agriculture and many officials in the Department admire the splendid work being done by this group. I believe it is one of the positive signs of a better future for rural America. Our relations with Ben Landis, with the Christian Rural Fellowship, with the National Catholic Rural Life Association, and with other religious groups interested in rural affairs is a good example of how the agencies of government and organized religion can cooperate and work harmoniously together.

The prospects, therefore, are very definitely favorable from the viewpoint of those anxious to preserve not only economic equalities but also the moral values

of American rural life. The fuller view of man as a spiritual being, and of life as being essentially religious in significance, will in the end prevail. The search for economic justice will in the end be successful, for the very reason that economic justice alone will not be sought, because only when all sides and phases of humanity and culture are given their due concern can there be a full flowering of any of them. Economic justice will never exist in a society until the non-economic phases of its culture embody balance and justice and harmony.

Out of the spiritual and moral confusion of this day, the world of agriculture is turning toward a fuller view of life. For a century and a half or more, all of America, in company with all of Occidental society, placed unprecedented emphasis upon economic matters. This emphasis upon economic and commercial concerns resulted in a vast increase in material wealth, but it also resulted in the inequalities and maladjustments that rock the world today.

These maladjustments led first to confusion, and now are tending to disillusion mankind with regard to the one-sided economic view of life that the nineteenth century developed. It may not be fully apparent yet, but I believe we are already headed away from the over-emphasis upon economic matters, and toward a fuller concept of human desires and aspirations.

The science of economics was always very much a child of its age. A science of economics developed because economic matters engrossed society. But the economic emphasis is waning, and economics of the older kind will also wane. The older, orthodox economists never liked Karl Marx. Yet in a real sense they were all rational materialists. The Marxism of the orthodox economists consists in their fondness for the "economic man," and their essential adherence to the doctrine of economic determinism. Now we all know that economic factors are very important in almost all social situations and problems. But the world with a new wisdom is turning away from the excessive confidence in economic factors that economists incline to.

I believe that a Christian economics is possible. But prerequisite to that is a Christian ethic and code of conduct. That may sound like a great barrier, yet I believe there is reason to hope our future Rural America will possess a culture wherein a Christian economics can operate. The leaders of Rural America today--those who champion the economic interests of farmers--are increasingly aware that the economic problem is only a part of a vast and ramified cultural problem. The significant new developments all tend to favor the broad, cultural aspect of our farm problem. Through such agencies as these, the seeds are being sown for a better rural society in which a Christian economics can operate, and which will preserve the highest standard of social justice, moral decency, and human dignity.
